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# CHAPTER 7

## REMEDIOS VARO'S FEMININE, SPIRITUAL QUEST

RICKI O'RAWE

Despite praise for the universal significance of her depictions of a quest for identity and freedom, female empowerment, and spiritual enlightenment, Remedios Varo's (Anglès, Girona 1908–Mexico City 1963) figurative, narrative paintings were considered to be out of step with an increasingly abstract, politically materialist avant-garde (Kaplan 1994, p. 33). At the same time—as a result of a feminist, post-enlightenment commitment to distance women from nonrational modes of thinking prevalent since Pythagoras—a dichotomy has emerged between a critical focus on the mythic/exoteric “female” dimension of her work and the mystical/esoteric significance.

This chapter aims to redress this imbalance by presenting the marriage of these exoteric and esoteric interpretations as central to appreciating the subversive potential of Varo's visual vocabulary. Focusing on how she associates the goal of her characters' quest with motifs resonant of Goddess mythology, I will argue that despite the controversial nature of this imagery within feminist discourse, we might still understand Varo's deployment of such symbolism as a resistance to the inherited spiritual paradigm of her generation.

Varo's work is subversive because it presents a space of active self-development that is *both* female and spiritual, circumventing—ironically—Surrealist dogma that eschewed the transcendent and, according to Gwen Raaberg, “conceived of woman as man's mediator with nature and the unconscious, *femme-enfant*, muse, source and object of man's desire, embodiment of *amour fou*, and emblem of revolution” (1995, p. 2). In this regard, it is also important because it provides, according to Whitney Chadwick, Surrealism's “most intense and far-reaching attempt to develop a new language through which the woman artist's ‘other’ reality might be communicated” (2002, p. 191).

Taking center stage in this space, Varo's protagonists undertake a female, spiritual quest for enlightenment that exists apart from a traditionally male-dominated, western religious schema. This chapter explores the synthesis of the political and the religious in Varo's art, continuing Kaplan's attempt to recode her marginalization “as a source of strength and her work as embodying

strategies of re-negotiation through which both style and content become subversive sites of resistance” (1994, p. 34). By presenting her work as both feminist and spiritual, I will reassert Varo’s credentials within the historical avant-garde.

Varo arrived in Paris in 1937 with her lover Benjamin Péret. Having fled the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War—Péret had been in Barcelona to take part in the uprising led there by Durruti—they reestablished contact with his close friend André Breton and began to take part in the group activities and exhibitions of the Surrealists.<sup>1</sup> In Mexico in 1941, having fled a war-torn Europe, Varo and Peret continued to meet daily with a group of people affiliated with Surrealism, but by this point, the tenor of her work had begun to change, moving away from the psychological imagery and playfulness associated with Surrealism, toward a figurative style replete with hermetic symbolism.

Although Varo’s arrival in Mexico has been evoked as the end of her Surrealist adventure (Varo 1990, p. 121), her major work in Mexico is replete with the hermetic imagery associated with post-World War II Surrealism. Breton first called for the “the occultation of Surrealism” in the *Second Manifesto* of 1929, but it wasn’t until the 1940s that Surrealists began to invest fully in the esoteric teachings. As Tessel Bauduin (2012, p. 259) has shown, the Hermetic Tradition became a poetic tool in Breton’s project of mythmaking, as he strove to promote the marvelous amid an increasingly hostile and dangerous century.

As such, Bretonian Surrealism’s engagement with esotericism was—much like Jung’s—principally poetic, in that they sought a new vocabulary to describe *psychological* phenomena. However, it was also the case that hermeticism provided Surrealism with a means to reassert its avant-garde credentials by making it more esoteric, that is, less accessible to the uninitiated (Bauduin 2012, p. 260).

It is somewhat ironic, then, that artists who engaged with this material on a subjective, spiritual level, rather than the aesthetic, psychical approach proposed by Breton, have been considered peripheral to Surrealism.<sup>2</sup> This marginalization was, arguably, double for women artists, who often found themselves cast as an enabling object, a *lapis philosophorum* that allowed for the male artist’s transformation (Belton 1995a, p. 51). The irony is particularly pronounced for a viewer of Varo’s work, which is exemplary of Breton’s strategy. By embracing hermeticism and combining it with gendered visual vocabulary, she was able to create a feminine, spiritual mythology that was avant-garde in its resistance to centralizing discourses on religion and sex.

Existing scholarship has already identified Varo's success in subverting the patriarchal implications of Breton's well-meaning, but somewhat misguided embrace of the feminine. Lauter (1984), Quance (2000), and Zanetta (2006) have shown how Varo looked specifically to Mother Goddess mythology for a source of imagery that predated Christian and Enlightenment modes of social organization. Zanetta (2006, pp. 39–40), for example, understands Varo's mystical imagery as indicative of a "proto-feminismo," whereby she picks up on a tradition of a female access to divinity through mysticism that bypassed the requirement for a male, ecclesiastical intermediary.

In line with the Bretonian appropriation of spiritual imagery, this line of criticism has tended to understand the voyages Varo presents as principally political or autobiographical—a female quest in which the heroine struggles toward a goal of personal empowerment as she resists the oppressive sexual inequality of twentieth-century society (Lauter 1984; Zanetta, 2006). Only a few analyze the spiritual significance of the protagonists' journeys (Haynes 1995; Arcq 2008). This is despite Chadwick's advice that they should properly be understood as "secret journeys to enlightenment, proceeding despite obstacles and despair, or bursting with creative life" (2002, p. 195). In fact, Varo's paintings are interesting because they sustain both this exoteric, outer significance and the esoteric, inner dimension, making the journey multifarious in its meaning. In this regard, they are akin to Cixous' *écriture féminine*, resisting the imposition of a single unified interpretation (1981, p. 253).

## THE FEMININE, SPIRITUAL QUEST

The symbolism of journey, or quest, has been a recurring theme in art throughout the history of humankind, suggesting that something about it is fundamental to the experience of time, space, and our passage through it. Jennifer Mundy has established that Surrealism in the 1930s was preoccupied with a search. As she explains: "their paintings and poems were characterized by images of searching and finding, of veiling and revealing, of presence and absence, of thresholds and passages, in a surrealized universe in which there were no clear boundaries or fixed identities" (Mundy 2001, p. 13). The quest was an alluring motif for artists attempting to find new ways of understanding contemporary existence, because it represents a desire to uncover an elusive truth about the self, the universe, and the relationship between the two. It is noteworthy that a significant number of Remedios Varo's paintings show a protagonist embarked on a journey. *Ascensión al monte análogo* (1960), *Camino árido* (1962), and the three canvases that make up the *Bordando*

*el manto terrestre* triptych (1960–1961), to mention but a few, depict a hero/heroine at different stages of a quest.<sup>3</sup> The paths they travel are adorned with imagery rich in symbolic content provoking a range of different interpretations.

The inner aspect of Varo's quests within feminized spaces also responds to Cixous' call for women to "put herself into the text" (1981, p. 245). Critics agree that Varo's protagonists are avatars of herself (Lauter 1984, p. 92; Kaplan 1988, p. 18; Sánchez 2006, p. 63).<sup>4</sup> The Parisian Surrealist group—with which she was closely affiliated between 1937 and 1940—promoted this mix of the marvelous and the autobiographical by allowing an utterly subjective reality to be explored in art, whereby the world is transformed by an individual's encounter with it and the machinations of the subconscious inundate the architecture of the mundane (Chadwick 2002, p. 236). This is what allows Varo's work to maintain multiple interpretations. The biographical element might be understood as a record of her personal psychological journey, as an expression of women's sociopolitical status, or as an exploration of spiritual essence. In this regard, I continue to agree with Roberta Quance that "Varo does not record autobiography in the sense of a biography of her self so much as a biography of Self, as if all the seekers held a core in common" (O'Rawe and Quance 2014, p. 2).

It is the spaces that the questers pass through that contribute symbolic meaning to the significance of the journey. Although lonely and isolated—emphasizing the personal, inner dimension of the journey—there is a corresponding outer significance communicated by Varo's choices of setting. She paints microcosmic actions that have repercussions on a macrocosmic level. Works such as *Microcosmos o determinismo* (1959), *Centro del universo* (1961), and *Naturaleza muerta resucitando* (1963) are inspired by the ancient axiom "as above, so below," a phrase from *The Emerald Tablet* associated with the legendary third-century alchemist Hermes Trismegistus, which Varo encountered in her study Hermeticism and the *Fourth Way*.<sup>5</sup> The phrase involves an ancient, prescientific way of conceiving the world as one great whole, in which spirit and matter, the inner world of the subject, and the outer world of the object are linked.

In Varo's pictorial cosmography, this melding of inner and outer realms is achieved by evoking a telluric divine ground that Jungian scholar Erich Neumann calls the Great Round—a Feminine Archetype that emerges through history and is related the myth of the Great Goddess. According to Neumann, the Goddess embodies the hermetic relationship described above, by existing as both the minutiae of the everyday and the supreme encapsulation of everything: "she

not only forms the earth and the heaven of the retort that we call life. And is not only the whirling wheel revolving within it, but is also the supreme essence and distillation to which life in this world can be transformed” (1991, p. 325).

Understood as such, the mysterious universe navigated by Varo’s wayfarer’s travel becomes imbued with immanence, as the forest, the cave, and the mountain inasmuch as they are considered womb-like spaces in Jungian psychology—are associated with rebirth (O’Rawe and Quance 2015). She does not present a mystical journey in the Christian sense; there is no Godhead-deity that is a ruling power. Instead we encounter something like Huxley’s *Divine Ground*.<sup>6</sup> The quester is reborn into an existence that is simultaneously connected to the Earth and encompassed within a divine cosmological unity.

From an early age, Varo immersed herself in esoteric teachings preoccupied with such immanence and which offered access to ritual and knowledge aimed at developing a spiritual self (Kaplan 1988, pp. 163–4). This early divergence from the prevailing theological conceptions of Catholicism—encouraged by her involvement with Péret, Surrealism’s “Grand Inquisitor” (Kaplan 1988, p. 55)—continued throughout her life as she gravitated toward systems that promoted the immanence of divinity in the world and the power of the individual to access it. Having moved beyond a religion that conceived of a wholly other, transcendent God, Varo’s depictions of a spiritual journey illustrate a proto-Goddess cosmology consonant with one developed subsequently by feminist artists like Leonora Carrington and Ana Mendieta, whose work was resistant to the secularizing forces of the vanguard.

Rather than become preoccupied with a deferred encounter with an enduring self, Varo presents the possibility of a mystical quest that reconfigures the traditional repositories of value promoted in her Catholic upbringing by focusing on the spiritual development possible in life. She aligns her quester with a mythology based on a female model subject. In doing so, she offers a riposte to Simone de Beauvoir’s observation that “women do not set themselves up as Subject and hence have erected no virile myth in which their projects are reflected; they have no religion or poetry of their own: they still dream through the dreams of men. Gods made by males are the gods they worship” (1983, p. 174). Opting instead for the immanence of the hermetic principle, Varo’s characters journey within and toward the Goddess, fully aware that they are destined to return to the mysterious cycle of life and death from which all things emerge. This is most clearly portrayed in *Naturaleza muerta resucitando* (1963), as we shall see below.<sup>7</sup>

## ESSENTIALISM CONTROVERSY

It may be that the marginalization of this spiritual interpretation of Varo's female quest is due to a feminist hesitance to depict these strands concurrently. Historically, a largely secular feminist movement felt alienated by religious and spiritual systems that were propped up by/propped up the patriarchal power structures of most organized religions. At a time of great political mobilization, they felt disconnected from the apolitical tendencies of "new age" spirituality (Robinson 2001, p. 588).

Yet, the emerging feminist "herstory" of religion had identified a heritage of female mystics that had subverted patriarchal claims to exclusive access to the divine, by presenting visions of a feminized cosmos, wherein mind and body, heaven and earth are related. In response, religiously inclined feminists began to develop a diverse body of scholarship that reconfigured the traditionally patriarchal slant of world religions by carving out a space for female spirituality within the feminist struggle for equality. Landmark works such as Mary Daly's *Beyond God the Father* (1973) have paved the way for feminist approaches to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Elsewhere, the work of Marija Gimbutas (1974), who uncovered knowledge of ancient Goddess civilization, and Merlin Stone (1976) instigated a return to the Goddess in the 1970s that spawned a new female-centered religious movement (Orenstein 1986, p. 174). This so-called Goddess spirituality represented "a movement that for the first time directed its energy and power toward self-consciously creating an art that would reimagine what it might have been like to be female, and to experience one's body, mind, spirit, and soul free of all the fetters imposed upon women by Western patriarchal religions" (Orenstein 1986, p. 176).

Anglo-American feminism was uncomfortable with the essentialism of this new paradigm of feminist spirituality and accused those involved of failing to recognize the cultural production of gender and sexuality, and of promoting instead "an innate, immutable essence of femininity" that they believed to be complicit with a binarism that maintains the metaphysics of patriarchal order (Schor 1986, p. 254).<sup>8</sup> Writing about "The Great Goddess Debate" of the 1980s, Mira Schor records the general consensus that "women artists who tried to *create* 'original' images of women, particularly positive ones, were deluding themselves: such efforts were doomed to relapse into unconscious stereotypes created by patriarchy. The best strategy was consciously to cull images from patriarchy's repertory and deconstruct them through ingenious juxtapositions and changed contexts" (Schor 1986, p. 255).

For her part, Orenstein recognizes the charge that attempts to establish universal matristic symbols have been interpreted as “essentialist,” but is inclined to defend the motivation behind the impulse:

I maintain, however, that the creation of a monolithic Goddess symbol was an attempt to establish not a universal image of the ‘feminine’ but rather a universal symbol of a worldwide civilization that was the antithesis of patriarchy. (1986, p. 295)

Griselda Pollock (2007) too sees the antiessentialist theoretical rhetoric as an alarming act of self-harm on women’s part. As she writes, “the quickest shortcut to intellectual suicide in even feminist circles is to talk to young women about the maternal feminine” (Pollock 2007, p. 30).

Varo does employ the strategy preferred by Schor. In her 1959 painting *El minotauro* (1959), she recasts the Minotaur as a female.<sup>9</sup> Unlike the myth, in which Theseus slays the beast, Varo’s female Minotaur has discovered the key that will allow her to escape from the labyrinth. The yonic fissure in the wall, where the keyhole floats, is reminiscent of the crevice in *Nacer de Nuevo* (1960) through which the protagonist is reborn, naked, and ecstatic.<sup>10</sup> Likewise, Varo’s Minotaur is given the power to escape the deadly maze and be reborn beyond its endless rooms.<sup>11</sup>

In *Papilla estelar* (1958), Varo subverts the idealized image of woman as nurturing mother.<sup>12</sup> In a lonely pavilion, seemingly high up among the clouds an unusually drab woman sits alone feeding the pabulum of the painting’s title to a caged moon. Although playing the role of provider, the woman appears glum, even trapped as she grinds celestial matter into food for her charge. The negativity of the image is emphasized when contrasted with *Creación de las aves*, where similar celestial material is used to create a vibrant, living bird that literally flies off the artist’s page.

However, Varo also displays a fascination with Goddess mythology that places her alongside the “deluded” women artists described by Schor above. Varo would not have been acquainted with the Goddess movement itself, but was a reader of Jung, who Orenstein cites as an influence on the reemergence of interest in the Goddess (1986, p. 176). It is also striking that Varo’s work contains many of the specifically matristic symbols of the Goddess Movement: “the spiral, the labyrinth, the egg, the circle, crescents, horns, quatrefoils, disks, coils, meanders,



lozenges, concentric circles, the labyris, the earth mound, and the serpent” that had been appropriated from Goddess art (Orenstein 1986, p. 177).

Her paintings also present a vision of the cosmos that tallies with the spiritual paradigm of the Goddess movement that emerged after her death. Within its theology—as conceived by its major contemporary spokesperson Carol P. Christ (2003)—women are empowered to develop a personal relationship with a feminized deity that is embodied, changing, and relational, rather than transcendent, omnipotent, and, ultimately, silent. Carol Christ’s woman-focused theology represents the most thorough systematization of the Goddess and religion. It promotes a mystical journey that subverts the language of subordination central to the Catholic mystical quest by making an individual’s search for experience of divine presence active and self-affirming. So conceived, the spiritual quest is deemed consonant with feminism as it does not insist upon the “abolition of individuality” and is thus at odds with “the language of surrender or annihilation” that characterizes the traditional mystical journey (Underhill 1999, p. 71).<sup>13</sup> The traditional *via negativa* requires a complete loss of self in order to attain mystical union with the “absolute, infinite, and unchanging” cosmos proposed by Western philosophical tradition, a formulation that is alienating to the female as it requires a transcendence of the body, a position that Carol P. Christ sees as explicitly antifemale (Christ 2008, p. 162). The “emptying” or “annihilation” of the self, central to the work of San Juan de la Cruz and Santa Teresa de Avila, retains the power dynamic of a patriarchal religion by understanding God as a dominating other (Christ 2008, p. 160). Such dualism is pervasive and has prompted philosophers and artists concerned with equality to reevaluate the tradition as a whole.

As an alternative, Christ proposes to shift the discourse of mysticism away from renunciation, proposing instead a feminist metaphysics that reevaluates the nature of God asserting that women’s mystical experience should be embodied and embedded in a dialogical, changing relationship with the divine (Christ 2008, p. 161). She conceives of an active mystical quest that does not require surrender or annihilation of the self. Instead, it offers an ontology that focuses on *becoming*, turning away from the dualistic model of *being* as an essential and unchanging substance. This presents a cosmography that is, as Carol Christ puts it, “an embodied, embedded mysticism that affirms the presence of the divine in physical and material reality and in selves” (Christ 2008, p. 165). This empowered self governs their relationship with other individuals, including the deity, and is not required to submit to a dominating other in their search for spiritual

plenitude (Christ 2003, p. 3). The process becomes a collaboration, as Christ provides a framework for mysticism that grants each individual a place in a unified cosmos that is in a constant state of transformation (Christ 1995, p. xiv).

This religion, systematized by Carol Christ with reference to process theology, actively undermines established binaries. Varo, having divested herself of classical monotheism, instead presents a universe where the divine is both immanent and transcendent. This alternative affirms the body as inseparable from the self and thus offers a paradigm for drawing the esoteric and exoteric interpretations of Varo's work together. In her paintings, she presents a world replete with a gendered, spiritual symbolism, in which active, creative women—no longer object, messenger, or muse in another's rite—attempt to uncover the secret mechanics of the cosmos. Protagonists emerge from walls, floorboards, and ceilings in search of self-actualization, overcoming dualities in a space that is static but somehow, ironically, teeming with life; always connected, somehow, to other realms of existence; simultaneously above, as below.

## THE END OF THE ROAD

It is of particular note that Varo's successful seekers—those approaching the end of their journey—arrive at a space that is replete with symbols of rebirth and of the acquisition of wholeness. This is the case in *La huida* (1961), the third panel of Varo's *Bordando el manto terrestre* triptych.<sup>14</sup> Across three panels, Varo's heroine first flees from the oppressive maternal control of a hive-like convent where she is unindividuated, having been sarcastically rendered identical to her classmates. She then escapes the forced labor of the tower in the second panel, before arriving at the entrance to a cave in the side of a womb-like mountain. For both Gimbutas and Neumann, these spaces represent the pregnant belly of the Earth Mother (1974, p. 324, 1991, p. 44). In Varo's painting, having escaped from the watchful eye of a master in the tower, the heroine arrives at her final goal with her lover, ready to be reborn.

Their cooperation suggests that each sex can interact creatively with the other without having to become subsumed within one or the other, addressing the passive role assigned to the female in Breton's treatise of self-development, *Arcane 17* (Belton 1995b, p. 208). Although accompanied by a male counterpart, Varo asserts the control of the female by having her gaze directly at their goal and steer their vessel in the corresponding direction. It is noteworthy that her

lover also contributes to the effort of reaching their goal by creating a sail from his cloak. What we have is an image of collaboration between the sexes. Understood in terms of the process philosophy that informs Carol P. Christ's theology, they embody a relation of giving *and* receiving, a coming together of two individuals in a mutually enhancing relationship separated from the dualisms that enforce a relationship of domination (Saiving 1981, p. 22). Once again Varo foreshadows Cixous, who in *The Newly Born Woman* asserts that one must be "complex, mobile, open" when negotiating with "the other sex," which should be approached "as a complement" of the self (Cixous 1975, p. 84).

In *Tránsito en espiral* (1962), the matristic symbol of the spiral encompasses the entire city the questers navigate. As Janet Kaplan has shown, the image resembles a Renaissance alchemical drawing of the Lapis Sanctuary, within which the Philosopher's Stone resides, associating the goal with the Enlightenment the stone offers (Kaplan 1988, p. 169). Reading the painting as an allegorical depiction of the journey to spiritual enlightenment, we can see that the seekers travel along the waterways of this feminized space with different degrees of success. Some are depicted without eyes, sailing away from the center. Others have their eyes closed as they move inward toward their goal. Some are accompanied by a companion and others travel alone. In each case, they seek a spiritual rebirth, which is represented by the tower within the labyrinthine spiral.

At the top of the tower a bird rests on a mandorla-shaped perch that is crowned with a fleur-de-lis. The spiritual connotation is double, as each represents the intersection of heaven and earth (Cirlot 2008, p. 203). The mandorla is also yonic and egg-shaped, reinforcing its associations of both with rebirth (Neumann 1991, pp. 54, 145). The shape is also readily associated with an egg, which Neumann associates too with the Great Round.

The spiritual enlightenment that the goal represents is reinforced by the significance of the fleur-de-lis. While most readily associated with the French monarchy, in Christian symbolism it symbolizes the purity of the Virgin Mary and is often depicted in scenes of the assumption. In its associations with water, it is also linked to sea that surrounds the spiral structure, which in turn complements the symbolism of the goats grazing on the walls of the enclosure:

Since water can be symbolically related to the breast as well as the womb, the rain can appear as the milk of the celestial cow and the earth water as the milk of the earth body, for the milk-giving animals, especially the cow and the goat as central symbols of the

nourishing, exist as cosmic entities both above and upon the earth. (Neumann 1991, pp. 47–8)

Another layer of significance is present in the structure's architecture. Alongside the octagonal-shaped gangway that encircles the turret, which can be associated with the alchemical goal of "squaring the circle," the spiral shape of the enclosure is representative of the cosmography within which the seekers' quest takes place.

The spiral represents the coming together of life and death in a perpetual rising and falling. According to Neumann, in terms of the feminine, the spiral represents the coming together of life and death within a cycle of regeneration: "She is the Earth Mother, the Mother of Life, ruling over everything that rises up and is born from her and over everything that sinks back into her" (1991, p. 106). The spiral represents the interaction between the inner and the outer spiritual realm that are intuitively linked in the Great Round. This link was encountered earlier within alchemical tradition, which uses the maxim "as above, so below," to express the macrocosmic implications of inner transformation. Gimbutas has also traced the spiral as an ancient symbol of energy and unfolding associated with regeneration (1974, p. xxiii; pp. 279–82).

Before exploring a representation of the macrocosmic, it is worth noting the conjunction of inner balance and cosmic presence in *Ermitaño*.<sup>15</sup> Here, a humanoid figure, cast in the shape of a six-pointed star, stands in the hollow of a tree at the end of a path through a dark forest. The imagery, as in the previous paintings, is framed in feminine symbolism, but in this work the focus is on a protagonist who has reached the end of the path. In her commentary on this painting, Varo describes the Seal of Solomon that makes up the character's body as "a six-pointed star, symbol of time and space in ancient esoteric teachings" (Gruen and Ovalle 1994, p. 51). Depicting the character within this seal, Varo marks its spiritual potential in the search for rebirth (Cirlot 2008, p. 281). A Yin Yang floats within an empty room in its chest cavity, suggesting an exploration of inner spaces. Varo describes this symbolism in her commentary: "Inside his open chest there is a yin-yang symbol representing inner harmony. This is the most beautiful symbol of all (at least I think so) for it is enclosed in a circle and has come to signify equilibrium" (Gruen and Ovalle 1994, p. 51). Varo presents the process of achieving spiritual unity as both desirable and attainable. The symbol, with its interlocking triangles, also represents the combination of the microcosmos and the macrocosmos, suggesting the hermetic principle.

In a preparatory sketch for this piece, named *Ermitaño meditando* (1955), Varo had depicted the character seated within a small tent.<sup>16</sup> In the finished work, however, she has replaced the tent with an enclosure in the side of a tree. Much like the cavern toward which the heroine flees in *La huida*, this womb-like sanctuary represents a place of regeneration. Like Neumann, Marija Gimbutas (1974, p. 158) also recognizes the importance of these womb-like spaces as a symbol, speculating that holes in trees had a similar significance to the holed stones used in rites of rebirth where the initiate was symbolically returning to the Goddess. This significance is also related to the red and black tints that seem to be moving through the forest, representing the fertility of the womb and thus the character's imminent rebirth.<sup>17</sup> Red is significant in alchemical tradition, representing the *rubedo* stage in which the alchemist capitalizes on the purification of base matter in order to fulfill his/her full potential in harmony with the Self, also known as *atman* in yogic traditions. Gimbutas notes that the color black can have the same associations:

Even the colors had a different meaning then in the Indo-European symbolic system. Black did not mean death or the underworld; it was the color of fertility, the color of the damp caves and rich soil, of the womb of the Goddess where life begins. White, on the other hand, was the color of death, of bones – the opposite of the Indo-European system in which both white and yellow are the colors of the shining sky and the sun. (1974, pp. xix–xx)

In Varo's painting, surrounded by the symbolism of rebirth, the protagonist stands at rest; arms crossed and with a serene look upon his/her face, as light appears to emanate from his/her whole being. In this instance, Varo uses androgyny to indicate the seekers' successful overcoming of difference, complementing the inner unity represented by the Seal of Solomon.

Varo's most overt convergence of the exoteric female quest and the esoteric female quest occurs in two paintings in which embodied female characters emerge reborn into the world as spiritually enlightened subjects. In *Luz emergente* a female figure emerges naked from a yonic crevice in the wall, holding an oil lamp. The lamp seems to guide her way as she is reborn into the world, as a male face gazes up, fascinated, from beneath the floorboards.<sup>18</sup> A similar scene is present in *Nacer de Nuevo*. A naked woman comes through an opening in the wall of an enclosure high in the middle of the forest. The room is part interior and part exterior, and vegetation sprouts in the corners, from the ceiling, and even on the surface of the wooden table. The table sits on a two-tone pentagonal floor, the interlocked black and white signifying the conjunction of opposites.

On the table, itself hexagonal to symbolize the achievement of wholeness, sits a chalice that reflects the image of the moon that can be seen through the hole in the ceiling. The woman is wide-eyed as she stares at the chalice. Kaplan notes the “varied legendary traditions link the moon with the realm of women’s powers” and concludes that “by associating this moment of psychic awakening with the lunar crescent and by emphasizing the character’s nubile breasts, Varo presented this as essentially a female quest” (1988, p. 166). It might also be added that the reflection of the moon in the chalice brings together the celestial and terrestrial realms, suggesting a cosmic significance to the protagonist’s rebirth that parallels the symbolism in the previously discussed works.

The celestial realm is the feminine container within which the spiritual transformation begins and ends. In the aforementioned paintings, Varo’s characters were spiritually reborn within their lifetime with a renewed connection to the macrocosmos. In her last completed painting, *Naturaleza muerta resucitando* (1963), the feminine cosmos takes center stage. The painting is one of very few that contains no human or humanoid character, but only vegetable and animal life in motion, making it Varo’s clearest rendering of the Great Round, within and toward which the seeker travels.

Kaplan outlines the religious overtones of the painting’s architecture by drawing attention to the ogival arches and “chapel-like space” (1988, p. 183). She writes that, “thus enshrined, this mandalic still-life-as-solar-system offers the ultimate message of hope: that the possibilities of regeneration are limitless, that out of destruction can come new life and growth” (Kaplan 1988, p. 183). Varo reappropriates both a space of traditional worship and an art form—the still life—reconfiguring them for an optimistic purpose that “energetically celebrates the cyclical forces of nature, the evolutionary spiral, and the continuity of eternal return” (Kaplan 1988, p. 183). In this convergence of the material and the spiritual, Varo asserts a remove from the teleology of the Abrahamic faiths, thus underlining her alternative spiritual system.

At first, the room appears disturbed, haunted by a poltergeist that is wreaking havoc at the dining table of a monastery or in the turret of a church. However, on closer inspection we find that the scene is not as chaotic as first impressions had suggested. Eight plates and a selection of fruits—apples, oranges, lemons, peaches, pomegranates, strawberries, plums, and mangoes—spin in orbit around a brightly burning candle. The candle is placed on a table and the objects, as well as the tablecloth, appear to be caught in a force that emanates from the flame in the center. Six

concentric circles ripple out from this point, consisting of light and golden dust. The pattern on the floor underneath the table is made up of triangles that appear to converge, unseen, below the table at the point where the candle rests. A number of flies hover within the room and plants grow on the floor where the juice falls from pieces of fruit as they collide. We are confronted with the symbolism of eight, seen previously in the octagon as representing the process of “squaring the circle.” The symbol relates to attaining union with the material and spiritual world and associates the number eight with spiritual regeneration and the combination of both the unchanging supernatural realm and the changing element that moves within the earth.

In this room, the cosmos is also depicted as existing in balance and chaos, creativity and destruction, with different fruits representing the orbit of planets around the sun. The items are geometrically balanced upon the canvas, spiraling outward from a central point at which we find the candle. This combines with a vertical symmetry, suggesting order and harmony within the painting. The chaos introduced by the colliding orbits of different fruits seems to disturb this balance, but the regeneration of the seeds that sprout from this destruction instead denotes optimism, creativity, and rebirth.

This painting is representative of the Great Round, showing a full system of death and rebirth, one within which Varo’s characters have been seeking to become immersed in previous paintings. In her final completed painting, Varo schematizes the cosmos, fundamentally constituted of the basic elements of everyday life, yet magically charged, indicating the presence of an invisible force. Her tableau allows for both the enclosed and simple existence apparent in the space, while also communicating the dynamism of the invisible forces she felt an individual should seek to understand and thus appropriately marks the end of Varo’s own pictorial exploration of the possibilities of personal and spiritual empowerment.

## CONCLUSIONS

As critics have noted, the symbols Varo employs are syncretistic and can sustain a diverse range of interpretations. Inspired by the visual vocabulary of Surrealism, she draws on diverse sources, ranging from the Gospels to medieval romance and alchemy. Like them, she uses this imagery to challenge the conventions of the prevailing sociopolitical status quo. However, unlike mainstream Surrealism’s focus on the mythopoetic possibilities of esoteric imagery—which, ironically, stripped mysticism of its enchantment—Varo used this symbolism with an eye to its original intent,

exploring the possibility of developing a robust, spiritual self, other than that proposed in mainstream religion.

In this chapter, I have shown that these two factors of her work need not be offered as alternative interpretations. By presenting a specifically feminine, spiritual idiom, Varo represents a space on the fringes of Surrealism, of feminism, and of religion. A liminal one that is fragile is thus open to marginalization, but also endowed with power. Although vulnerable to the deconstructivist criticism that flourished after her death, her work was undoubtedly subversive within the cultural milieu of her lifetime, being doubly radical in its resistance to the dominant patriarchal and spiritual authorities.

For Varo, there was power to be found in exploring a personal journey of political *and* spiritual development. As she expressed to her husband Walter Gruen—"I imbibed Catholicism along with my mother's milk. I should find answers by travelling down my own path, and by my own efforts" (Gruen and Ovalle 1994, p. 109). As part of this project, Varo created work sympathetic to Carol Christ's vision of a feminist Goddess theology. Her paintings show a *via positiva* that subverts the norms of Western patriarchal theology. Subsequently, her work expresses the dual potential of a reimagining of divinity within the world and removing the requirement to separate the political and metaphysical. As I have shown, the space of Varo's paintings presents an unconventional conception of the sacred that exists beyond patriarchal religious traditions, while valorizing female subjectivity. One must exist on the margins in order to achieve such subversion.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Her work from this period shows the influence of their techniques and themes—although most has yet to be collected and is underrepresented in her *catalogue raisonné* (González Madrid 2014, pp. 56–7).

<sup>2</sup> This is exemplified in the patronizing attitude that Breton held toward the artists involved with *Le Grand Jeu* (Nadeau 2008, pp. 89–90).

<sup>3</sup> *Ascensión al monte análogo* (1960), oil/plywood, 67 × 31, CAT 286; *Camino árido* (1962), vinyl/bristol board, 70.5 × 21.5, CAT 332; *Hacia la torre* (1960), oil/masonite, 1.23 × 1.00, CAT 303. *Bordando el manto terrestre* (1961), oil/masonite, 1.00 × 1.23 cm, CAT 304. *La huida* (1961), oil/masonite, 123 × 98, CAT 306. All catalogue numbers, designated with the abbreviation CAT, are taken from the *Catálogo razonado* (Gruen and Ovalle, 1994). The entire catalog can be viewed online at [www.remedios-varo.com](http://www.remedios-varo.com) [Accessed March 7, 2015].



<sup>4</sup> Epps (2003, p. 199) has questioned the practice of reading Varo's work as exclusively autobiographical, warning against the temptation to attribute a univocal interpretation.

<sup>5</sup> *Microcosmos o determinismo* (1959), tempera/masonite, 94.5 × 89.5, CAT 235; *Centro del universo* (1961), gouache/cardboard, 44 × 41 cm (romboid), CAT 307; *Naturaleza muerta resucitando* (1963), oil/canvas, 110 × 80 cm, CAT 361. Varo will have come across references to this principle in relation to the esoteric possibilities of symbols in P.D. Ouspensky's *In Search of the Miraculous*. In his text, Ouspensky outlines the importance of the principle of "as above, so below," writing that "in studying the world and its laws a man studies himself, and in studying himself he studies the world. In this sense every symbol teaches us something about ourselves" (Ouspensky 1977, p. 280).

<sup>6</sup> Huxley wrote that human beings have an Inner, eternal Self and that their true purpose is to become identified with this Self. Achieving this means coming to what he called the Divine Ground, an all-encompassing unity akin to Brahman: "the Atman, or immanent eternal Self, is one with Brahman, the Absolute Principle of all existence; and the last end of every human being is to discover the fact for himself, to find out Who he really is" (2004, p. 2). Jaime Moreno Villarreal writes that *The Perennial Philosophy* was one of Varo's favorite books, noting that she owned a copy within which she marked and annotated her favorite passages (2008, p. 116).

<sup>7</sup> *Naturaleza muerta resucitando* (1963), oil/canvas, 110 × 80 cm, CAT 361.

<sup>8</sup> Critics continue to explore the role of essentialism in feminism. Distinctions are often made between Anglo-Saxon and French lines of enquiry. For an enlightening discussion of the differences in their approach to the sacred, see Daphne Hampson (2007). For an overview of the main controversies, see Alison Stone (2007).

<sup>9</sup> *El minotauro* (1959), oil/masonite, 60 × 30, CAT 252.

<sup>10</sup> *Nacer de Nuevo* (1960), oil/masonite, 81 × 47, CAT 289.

<sup>11</sup> According to John Layard, the labyrinth, like the spiral, "always has to do with death and rebirth, relating either to life after death or to the mysteries of initiation" (1942, p. 652).

<sup>12</sup> *Papilla estelar* (1958), oil/masonite, 92 × 62, CAT 213.

<sup>13</sup> Although religious experience can be sought after in all traditions, whether actively or passively, partaking in an active quest for mystical experience, or personal knowledge of divine presence, is usually understood as a hallmark of nonreligious mysticism (Gilbert 1991, p. 49).

<sup>14</sup> *Hacia la torre* (1960), oil/masonite, 1.23 × 1.00, CAT 303. *Bordando el manto terrestre* (1961), oil/masonite, 1.00 × 1.23 cm, CAT 304. *La huida* (1961), oil/masonite, 123 × 98, CAT 306.

<sup>15</sup> *Ermitaño* (1955), oil and inlaid mother-of-pearl/masonite, 91 × 40 cm, CAT 124.

<sup>16</sup> *Ermitaño meditando* (1955), pencil/paper, 22 × 15, CAT 123.

<sup>17</sup> Neumann (1991, pp. 171, 308) associates the color red with fertility.

<sup>18</sup> *Luz emergente* (1962), oil/masonite, 65 × 28, CAT 350.

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